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# MUENCHAUSENS OF THE AIR

By GORDON BRUCE

*Illustration by Will Crawford*

IT BEGAN with the first flimsy machine—the lying, I mean. The first crop of aviators thrived on lies. They could do it. Common folks believed what they were told. A man who could sail 6,000 feet aloft on a few bits of canvas tied up with wire might come down with any sort of tale. Nobody could prove it wasn't true.

In the beginning there was the "air pocket" brigade. "Holes in the air" came to be a popular and effective phrase among the newspaper men who reported the early flights. If the aviator got a sudden jolt from a freakish current and slid down a few feet, it was chronicled as a "hair-breadth escape." The stunts which the youngest fliers do to-day, just for variety, were set down as miracles five years ago.

You really couldn't blame the birdmen, as they were called—with quite a lot of respect. Publicity was a priceless boon, and lies always have been a cheap commodity. And so it came about that the liars multiplied faster than the aeroplanes, and when the aviator lacked the inspiration his friends lied for him.

Two thousand feet was stretched into 5,000 with practically no effort. Tiny contracts assumed mighty proportions under the scientific treatment of the liars. Horsepower was frightfully manhandled; the term "speed" lost all significance. In short, everybody lied about everything.

For two or three blissful years it went on. Then the supply of really good stories dwindled. The editors became altogether too exacting, and it was recognized that a lie is no good unless somebody will believe it.

## THE WAR WAS A GODSEND TO EXHAUSTED AERIAL IMAGINATION.

Things were getting pretty bad, when along came the war—the war, with its inspiring possibilities! The element of uncertainty in the pending clash of aircraft on high opened up a new field. There were no boundaries; anybody could come in. They came.

The fighting had been going on in France for about two days when the first good lie was told. It was well told, too. Cables and telegraph wires the world over hummed with the news of how a French aviator—a very patriotic one—had rammed and destroyed a Zeppelin simply by flying into it. Of course, the dispatches said, he was killed.

The liars with little imaginations stood rather aghast at that story. It was a terrific pace to set, and caused considerable consternation; also, much admiration. But great heights hold no terrors for such experts, and after a lull of a few days they hit their stride.

They did remarkbly well. It was a slim day that did not witness the bagging of at least one Zep. Gloomy indeed was the outlook when twenty-four hours did not reveal a new air hero who destroyed, single handed, four enemy machines. These heroes were very modest. As a rule, they lighted cigarettes and declared it was all in the day's work—they were simply carrying out orders. It was good copy—and with so little effort, too.

## A QUART OF MOSELLE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR A FRENCH "EYE-WITNESS" STORY.

Over in Paris a clever correspondent was sitting over a bottle of Moselle one evening, when an idea came to him. He thought about it so much that it stayed with him all night. In the morning he wrote a splendid "eye-witness" story of how a squadron of aeroplanes swooped down and stampeded the horses of a cavalry regiment. They ran like anything, he declared. He had all the details—all but one. That was of a minor nature and embraced the fact that there wasn't any cavalry regiment—not within fifty miles.

But why allow a trifle to upset a narrative? The story carried wonderfully well, as did several variations which followed. It was fine, this air business, and the top layer had hardly been scratched. There were hotel balconies and cafes. They were perfect for it. Not being handicapped by a knowledge of the subject, there was no limit to what even a mediocre imagination could evolve. There were tons and tons of material; the air was charged with it. Anybody could write a book on it—give him time.

## WHEN ONE WAS IN DOUBT, ONE COULD ALWAYS LUG IN THE "GRAY, IMPENETRABLE FOG."

Another enterprising chap drew some inspiration from a rainy day and put nature to work for him. He was something of a poet, but knew nothing about mechanics. So he dragged a lot of clouds into his dispatches. He had any number of them hovering conveniently over the battle lines, and in each cloud lurked an aviator, flying around and around, ready to pounce upon the first unsuspecting Hun who flew by. Quite simple. flying about in clouds. Ask any experienced flier.

Anyhow, technique had no place in an aviation story. What did it matter that an aviator loses his sense of the horizontal when he dives into a cloud? He is walled in by gray, impenetrable fog. He might be flying upside down, for all he knows, still under the impression that his feet are pointing at the earth and not the sky. However, technical detail has no color, and nobody would read it anyway.

If necessary, a biplane could be turned into a monoplane by a mere scratch of the pen. A crew of ten men could easily be made to climb aboard a single-seater scout. Heavy calibre guns could be mounted in the most remarkable places—on the skids or ailerons, according to the occasion.

One youth, out for a record, pestered an officer of the flying corps for days. All he wanted was confirmation of his belief that a combination submarine and aeroplane was in the building and would be ready for trial in a few days. "If it never comes through," he urged, "no harm will be done. It will appear that the trials showed the need of further experiment."

And, speaking of trials, there is a world of magic in the word. The most impossible scheme in existence can be tried out. The trials which never took place furnished the best material. Let a wild idea spring into being, and the corps of ambitious anticipators spun their yarns with great abandon and an explanatory paragraph to the effect that "trials were being conducted."

About this time a journalist (he spurned the term "reporter") who once upon a time had frequented the Broadway tea dances lighted a cigarette. From his comfortable room in the Palais d'Orsay he discerned the French aviation corps doing an aerial tango over the German trenches. He saw it all. The grim battle lines; the ugly guns; the black mud of the earthworks—everything. And on high those intrepid fliers sped about, just over the Germans' heads.

It was uncanny. He said so in the story. The shells were bursting all around them. They were almost low enough to be hit with a hand grenade. Did they care? Not they! They laughed and jeered at their foes alternately, and came down in time for supper. And, of course, no insignificant commanding officer could possibly object to such tactics. Nobody was killed. They never are.

## THE MAN WHO WAS SEIZED WITH SUDDEN FURY AND JUST HAD TO THROW SOMETHING.

They—meaning the lies—came thick and fast after this. An alleged British captain journeyed to the United States and told of his remarkable experiences dropping darts on the Germans. With the instinct of a true artist, he described his sensations when he shovelled a few thousand steel arrows over the side.

"I was seized with a sudden fury, and just had to throw something," he declared at the Aero Club luncheon table. It sounded reasonable. He was a substantial looking fellow and wore a uniform labelled "Royal Flying Corps." Further, he had purchased several thousand dollars' worth of aeronautical equipment for cash.

The British regulation against wearing a uniform in a neutral country was no part of an Aero Club member's education. So the "captain" found smooth sailing until C. G. Grey, of London, editor of "The Aeroplane," called the turn on him. Not only that, but he added some caustic and legitimate remarks about the reporter who wrote the story—this to my personal knowledge.

## 'TWAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT, AND SEATED IN AN AEROPLANE—

Came then another fabrication. It was far too good to be called a lie. Out of Toronto it came, and a heap of money was spent in telegraph tolls to get it before the public in time for breakfast.

It was a British lieutenant this time. He had been buying horses or scrap iron—I forget which—for the government. But instead of travelling by rail to the Far West, where such things grow, he just flew across the continent.

He started on a dark night from somewhere on Long Island, he said. From his account of the long flight it might be gathered that he was one of those aviators who always fly by night. It was quite interesting, his story, especially to those who had spent much time and money on 'planes designed to stand the rigors of such a trip.

What kind of machine he used never came out, or where it was that he robbed those garages of gasolene in the gray hours of the early morning, or whether he sailed over Kicking Horse Pass or through the Yellowhead, or a lot of other details which only the really curious would have enjoyed reading.

Anyway, he made the Coast. He didn't stop there, however, for through some mysterious channel he had learned of two German seaplanes which were carrying many bombs and bearing down on Vancouver. He went out to meet them, and the clash came off Vancouver Island. A bit of a clash it was, too, as the lieutenant modestly admitted. But he managed to dispatch both adversaries, although he was wounded twice. He had some red scars to prove it.

But the foregoing incidents count for little in comparison with some amazing statements of American manufacture which also found their way into print. In military parlance they were created "somewhere in New York."

A slight, florid man sat one day in an office not far from Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue. Opposite him was a reporter for a New York morning paper. The slight man was telling his friend something interesting; certainly the attention paid to his words indicated that. At times he pounded the table with his fist, while his voice rose sharply as he made a telling point. At other times he leaned forward across the table, and his words came hissing through his teeth in a whisper that carried mystery and conviction.

"Don't talk to me about the British navy," he was saying. "Do you want to hear something? Will you keep your source of information to yourself?"

The reporter nodded cautiously, as reporters do. Then the little man drew from a drawer some sheets of paper on which were set down divers memoranda—dates, names and figures. He studied them for a moment, and continued:

"The German Zeppelins are going to win the war. Nobody who has not studied the subject has any idea of their powers. Let me tell you (here he beat an accompaniment to his words with his knuckles), the Zeppelins have gone out from the Kiel Canal and destroyed at least one British battleship a day for the last two weeks!"

The reporter, of course, was amazed.

"Yes, sir," went on his informant, "and you'll find every word of this is true. Of course, the British are not admitting it, and the Germans can't get the news through. How do I get these reports? That is more or less of a secret, but I'll tell you this much—it is sent by carrier pigeon to Barcelona and mailed from there. I have a particular interest in keeping posted." Here he smiled mysteriously.

The reporter became interested and asked for details, which were promptly forthcoming. The little man had them all—the names of the ships, the dates and locations of the sinkings, the numbers of the Zeppelins accomplishing the feats and the sizes and weights of the bombs dropped. He described minutely just how each of the unfortunate vessels was affected by the missiles and whether she sank by the bow or stern.

Truth to tell, the reporter hesitated a long time before turning in his story. But he had taken careful notes, and it was too early in the war to jump at the conclusion that the thing was impossible. He couldn't let it go if there was a chance of its being true. So finally he ran it for what it was worth, and thus was recorded another of the series of great lies.

In justice it must be pointed out that some of the stories which appeared were written and printed in perfectly good faith. In such instances the author frankly revealed the source from which his copy was derived. Others were pure fiction, and attributed to all sorts of imaginary personages. The war reporter's path is strewn with difficulties, and he is quick to snatch at the possibility of a beat.

He feels that he must produce a certain amount of copy, whether the material for it exists or not. Some really able men maintain that when there is a dearth of news faking is legitimate, provided it makes good reading and injures nobody. It's mostly a matter of conscience.

## AIR FICTION IS NOT ONLY STRANGER THAN TRUTH, BUT SNAPPIER.

But among all the lies of the war one stands out with exceptional distinctness, not so much on account of its quality, perhaps, but because it was recorded by an American writer of long established reputation—one who had no need to resort to the compiling of unproved reports and who had no fear of losing caste for failure to produce results.

The article appeared in the December issue of a reputable New York magazine. It dealt with the subject of aviation in a general way, and was largely a résumé of previously published facts bearing on military aeronautics. The only excuse for the whole story and the foundation on which it was built was the statement that the flying boat America, constructed for Rodman Wanamaker's transatlantic effort, had destroyed, single-handed, three submarines.

Assuming that the tale had been true, it was well worth writing about for several reasons; because, you see, it would have settled once and for all the question of whether it pays to build huge aeroplanes for offensive purposes entirely. If one machine could in a few months sink three submarines, the naval men of the world would think a lot less about expensive destroyers and devote more of their time to the acquisition of seaplanes.

Perhaps already some of them are acting on the information contained in the article in question. Perhaps, too, they will restrain themselves when they learn the truth of the matter, which is that the America never destroyed even one submarine, and that not more than two undersea boats have been sunk by aviators since the war began.

The U-boat which torpedoed the Arabic was reported destroyed by an aerial bomb, but her loss has been denied by an official German report, although it was admitted that she had been damaged. The second case is that of another which met its fate at the hands of British and French aviators patrolling the waters off Ostend. There is reason to believe the last report authentic.

## THE FIRST BATTLE BETWEEN TWO SEAPLANES, WHICH HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR A YEAR.

Of late there has been another lapse, for the reason that the fund of improvised anecdotes has slumped tremendously. An evidence of this state of affairs appeared in a news story published a few weeks ago in a leading metropolitan daily. Three-quarters of a column was devoted to the yarn. The main feature was an account of what was termed "the first battle between two seaplanes"—a remarkable statement. This diversion has been going on for more than a year.

In America the writers have fallen back on wild rumors of marvellous aeroplanes which, they assert, are being manufactured there for the annihilation of Berlin and other kindred objects. Only a few days ago came the report that Britain was building a huge air fleet for the avowed purpose of wiping out the Krupp works at Essen. Naturally, the British War Office would scatter broadcast the news of such an intention.

As a matter of fact, the exact value of aircraft in warfare has not been determined. They are known to be indispensable, and new uses for them are becoming apparent rapidly. But attributing to them impossible feats will not make them more effective.

## A SUMMARY OF THE VALUE OF THE ZEPPELINS TO GERMANY.

The Zeppelins have been a disappointment. All the damage they have done which could possibly aid the Germans in a military sense would not begin to equal the cost of a single one of these craft. Therefore, assuming that future wars will be conducted with a greater element of common sense than this one, the Zeppelin can be safely eliminated.

What determines the worth of an aeroplane is the work it may be depended upon to perform. The war has shown that but two tasks may be assigned to aviators with the positive knowledge that they will be carried out promptly and accurately. These are scouting and range finding.

Important movements cannot be concealed from the eyes of the aerial scouts. As the fliers gain experience, their estimates as to numbers of troops and significance of certain tactics on the ground below become more reliable.

Range finding is equally important. Officers who have been at the front for a year admit that once the aeroplanes appear over their heads and commence signalling the gunners the occupants of that particular position may as well move. The proper guidance of a single shot from one of the big guns saves more than the cost of an aeroplane.

Thus, for at least two reasons, the flying machine is invaluable and indispensable. The army or navy without them is at a hopeless disadvantage. The commanders in the field are insisting that each battery be complemented with its quota of range finding aircraft. The supply of scouts has come nearer to keeping pace with the demand than in other branches of the air service.

## BOMB-DROPPING AS AN ART IS STILL IN ITS INFANCY.

As naval patrols seaplanes are extremely useful. They can do the scouting formerly left to the destroyers far more rapidly and at a negligible cost. The wide range of vision afforded the aviators and the high speed of the machine render this arm of the service inestimably important.

As a means of offence the future of the aeroplane is problematical. Without question good results have been obtained from the dropping of bombs on railways, ammunition depots and munition works. But in most cases it has been a matter of pure luck.

Bomb-dropping devices have not been perfected to the degree necessary to make the procedure dependable. When the destruction of an army division or a line of trenches is attempted by a fleet of many hundreds of machines we shall know more about the subject. One thing I know from experience—it is disconcerting and demoralizing to have aerial bombs dropped in one's immediate vicinity.

All the belligerent governments are experimenting with enormous machines, both for land and sea. More power and greater speed are the aims of the constructors. There is, of course, a limit, but how far off it is nobody can prophesy at this period of the development. The field of the aeroplane, as a military and naval asset, will be determined only when that limit is reached.

But the lying will go on. We shall hear many more amazing tales of prowess on high—all of which will be an obstacle to those who are working out the big problem. Failure to fulfil widely advertised predictions, reasonable or otherwise, always proves injurious.

Just as irresponsible talk on technical matters by those who know nothing of them will work for evil, especially when there is a chance of such chatter being published. The public has been fed on wild statements emanating from sources neither reliable nor genuine and the mantle of authority has fallen on unworthy shoulders.

## THE ATTITUDE OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TOWARD AVIATION.

As to the part which the United States government has played, its attitude toward aviation has been nothing short of criminal. No nation stands so much in need of an efficient air service, and none of the other powers is so weak. When the time is ripe, when the day of reckoning comes, the present and past indifference of those who dictate the aeronautical policy, their assurance, their amazing blindness, the supreme quality of their incompetence—these will be remembered. The reckoning will be quite complete.

In regard to the ultimate significance of the aeroplane in war, it is not now to be estimated. Neither prophecy nor imagination is equal to the vision of the Wright brothers guiding their first frail gliders above the sand dunes at Kitty Hawk. There was the beginning. For the end, the meaning of it all, the progress and the final fulfilment—we must wait and see.